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“Côtier” sexual identity as constructed by the urban Merina of Antananarivo, Madagascar

Kirsten Stoebenau

- 1 In my ethnographic examination of the social organization of sex work in Antananarivo, conducted over 14 months, during 2003 and 2004 (see Stoebenau 2009), I worked closely with 10 key informant sex workers who occupied different social positions within a “field” of sex work. The social position which held the greatest volume of economic capital was occupied by women who “went out” (*mivoaka*) to nightclubs and bars to *mitady vady Vazaha* (find foreign — usually White — husbands).¹ One issue that remained for a long time mysterious was why it was that women who identified with the local Merina ethnic group did not occupy this high social position within the sex work “field.” While Merina hold the most power (political, social, economic) in Antananarivo, this power structure was not reproduced among women sex workers. Instead, women who self-identified as Merina *chose* to streetwalk rather than frequent nightclubs or bars, and in doing so, they both earned less money (and therefore held less economic capital) and placed themselves at much higher risk of street violence and crime.
- 2 The reasons for this decision — as it was not for a lack of knowledge that the indoor venues were both more lucrative and safer — are rooted in systems of social stratification based on ethnic identity in Antananarivo. As I detail below, these indoor venues were seen by elite Merina as raucous, inappropriate spaces frequented by *côtier* (of the coast) women and/or *côtier* sex workers drawn to these venues in order to find European men. As *côtier* spaces, sex work in these spaces operated on a different set of codes and rules, rules an elite Merina woman should never be seen trying to follow. The significance of the *côtier*-nightclub association was strong enough to detract many local sex workers from entering nightclubs, choosing instead to work on the street at night and hide their identity from their communities during the day.
- 3 In order to more fully understand the actions of local Merina sex workers and what was at stake, one must examine how *côtier* are imagined in Antananarivo, and more

specifically, how *côtier* sexuality is constructed in contrast to that of the Merina. One must also understand the culture and habitus of the nightclub in order to comprehend why a self-identifying Merina woman wishing to hold onto even a low volume of social capital within her own community might shift her preferences away from the nightclub and on to the street, despite its dangers.

The Merina *versus* the *Côtier*: an Imagined Dichotomy

- 4 Dr. Solofo: [You asked] what do people in Madagascar think of sex workers? Well, in Madagascar, it's two different things: there's the culture of the high plateau and there's the culture of the *côtiers*. For the high plateau, people think that sex workers are a real disgrace. But for the *côtiers*, it's really a form of work, one can choose their path, especially in order to find Vazaha and to go elsewhere: to France, or the United States, to England, all that. It is really a means by which to escape misery and poverty. But here in [Antananarivo], here on the high plateau, it's really an enormous disgrace
- 5 In the quote above, Dr. Solofo, a doctor from Antananarivo who coordinated an outreach program for street-based women sex workers in the capital of Antananarivo, explains how sex work is viewed in different parts of Madagascar. His description serves as a succinct illustration of how elite urban Merina of Antananarivo socially construct the sexual identity of the imagined "*côtiers*." He neatly distinguishes Madagascar into two cultural groups, the central highland plateau (comprising the Merina and Betsileo ethnic groups) as compared to the *côtiers*, used to summarize the at least 16 other conventionally-defined groups in Madagascar. He draws a clear contrast between these two identity groups, one that was repeated to me by many other elite urban Merina: for those on the high plateau sex work, and by extension female promiscuity, remunerated or otherwise, is shaming, while for the *côtiers*, it is "normal."
- 6 Elite urban Merina depictions of cultural identity in Madagascar as a dichotomy between the Merina or high plateau and the *côtier* dramatically simplify cultural identity in Madagascar. Among the numerous ethnic groups in Madagascar, some, such as the Bara of the central south, do not in fact inhabit a coastal zone at all. The *côtier* identity is one that is, by definition, imagined — as is any dichotomy between the *côtier* and the Merina. That said, perhaps because the terminology is ubiquitous in the city of Antananarivo, it is adopted by non-Merina living in Antananarivo as a means by which to distinguish themselves from the Merina, even if they would not use the terminology, nor identify as *côtier* in their region of origin. For the most part, however, the extent to which I describe the *côtier* as an organized, self-defined, and cohesive group outside of Antananarivo is a reflection of how urban Merina communicate ethnic diversity in Madagascar. It does not mean that the same understanding exists outside of Antananarivo in the same way, nor does it necessarily mean it will exist within Antananarivo in this same way in the future. It is also important to emphasize that when addressing this imagined dichotomy, I am reflecting the perceptions of the dominant culture of the urban Merina, or those who hold substantial social, political and economic power and therefore define what matters (i.e. *fotsy* Merina).² The ideas I reflect here of what it means to be Merina — as contrasted to what it means to be *côtier* (see footnote 2) — are expressions of the urban population in the capital. Numerous scholars assert that the imagined identities of urban and rural Merina differ substantially; for example, the Merina identity is far less emphasized in the

rural context where instead people identify more strongly as simply Malagasy (Larson 2005 pers. comm., Rakotomalala 2005 pers. comm., Graeber 1996).

The historical context of the Merina-*côtier* dichotomy

- 7 Among elite urban Merina, the constructed Merina-*côtier* dichotomy is laden with value judgments rendering the *côtier* inferior, based at least in part upon colonial and missionary influenced racialized discourse that drew distinctions between "civil" Merina and "savage" *côtiers*. When applied specifically to women's sexuality, the civil-savage dichotomy results in the expectation that Merina women are passive and chaste, while *côtier* women are promiscuous sexual predators.
- 8 The French contributed to the racialization of a Merina-*côtier* dichotomy, writing about the distinctions between the light-skinned, civilized Merina as compared to the dark-skinned coastal savages (Raison-Jourde & Randrianja 2002). They also contributed heavily to the politicization of this dichotomy. The French found the Merina a formidable threat to their colonial intentions for Madagascar in the mid to late 1800s, as the Merina had an established and expanding kingdom. Many other groups in Madagascar shared this view of the Merina as they were either threatened or occupied by the Merina Kingdom and considered the Merina as the single greatest threat to their sovereignty. French officials constructed the Merina as a foreign invader, whom the French could overthrow, thereby liberating these groups from Merina occupation (*ibid.*). This relationship between the French and many *côtiers* groups may carry significance today in explaining how romantic relationships with Vazaha are viewed by the Merina as compared to other groups in Madagascar. While for many ethnic groups, marrying a Vazaha is considered almost unequivocally positive and desirable; this is not the case among elite Merina. This distinction is perhaps an extension of the fact that the French represent the single colonial power that stripped the Merina of their sovereignty. Yet, for other Malagasy groups, the French have long been considered an ally, and therefore relationships with Vazaha among these groups would understandably be viewed more positively.³ As Dr. Solofo intimates above, perhaps the most significant distinction made between the *côtier* sex worker and the Merina sex worker in Antananarivo is that the objective for the *côtier* sex worker is to find a Vazaha husband.
- 9 Missionary presence in Madagascar was quite established by the mid-1800s. Early missionaries found the most receptive audience among people in Imerina (central highland Madagascar, area occupied by the Merina) (Rakotomalala 1996). Elite urban Merina describe themselves as significantly more Christian than *côtiers*; however, there is some indication that at least on an urban playing field, this is less and less the case. A study examining socio-demographics and household economics in the seven major cities in Madagascar found that while 97% of respondents in Antananarivo belonged to a church of Christian denomination; so did 94% of respondents in the eastern coastal city of Tamatave, 91% in the southern highland city of Fianarantsoa and 76% in the southwestern coastal city of Toliara (Instat & Projet Madio 2001). Therefore, there is indication that the Merina are significantly more Christian than some *côtier* populations only to the extent that they imagine themselves to be and place value on their understanding and practice of Christian values.⁴ The most pertinent among these values is the emphasis placed on Merina women's chastity.

- 10 As in many other parts of the world, missionaries to Madagascar expended enormous amounts of time and energy attempting to establish patriarchal norms which stressed the control of women's sexuality. When speaking with elite urban Merina today, one would have to conclude the efforts were largely a success. Documentation of missionary efforts to impose these belief systems on women in Imerina, however, illustrate that this value was not immediately accepted. For example, historian Predelli shows through her detailed history of one 19th century "asylum" for girls in the current province of Antananarivo, that at that time, in Imerina, "*sexuality was not confined to the married state, and the intended shelter of the asylum did not prevent some of the girls from becoming 'fallen women'*" (Predelli 2000:88). The missionaries in Antananarivo were particularly concerned about undoing "the most common Malagasy sin," sex outside marriage (either premarital or extramarital). About one out of four girls being actively taught the "proper Christian" way at this asylum failed to uphold this important tenet of Christianity and femininity. Below, I illustrate some of the lasting effects of such missionary efforts, despite these challenges.

Current elite Merina constructions of Merina versus *côtier* sexuality: the "value" of Merina women

Dr. Solofo: ... Here on the high plateau, a woman has great value. That's the culture of the high plateau

Kirsten: So, there is not this great value of women on the coast?

Dr. Solofo: On the coast there is not this great value, because once a girl is fifteen or sixteen, they build a small home for her, to have men there, but here on the high plateau, that would not be acceptable, one must always wait for marriage before [doing that].

- 11 In conversations with well over 20 academics, historians and other elite urban Merina in Antananarivo, I was provided with the following ideal type of the sexual demeanor of Merina women, they are chaste and prudish as compared to women from other groups, and are not as "easy" as *côtier* women. Merina people, in general, are not as open about sexuality, and these belief systems about sexuality are in large part a result of Merina being more Christian.⁵ This depiction is captured by Dr. Solofo's description of the "great value" of chaste highland women. This "great value" is preserved as a result of efforts to guard women from engaging in sexual behavior outside of marriage.
- 12 Conversely, ideal type descriptions of *côtier* sexuality suggest that *côtier* women have the liberty to engage in as much sexual activity as they please without the slightest of social consequences. Urban Merina explained that it is completely "normal" for *côtier* women, beginning in their youth, to enjoy sex with many partners and often. In fact, according to some Merina, there is an almost insignificant distinction between being simply *côtiers* and a *côtier* sex worker. One taxi driver explained that about 70% of *côtiers* are sex workers! A few respondents to a household-based survey on community perceptions of sex work in Antananarivo went so far as to aver that sex work was a "way of life" for the *côtiers*. Dr. Solofo was far from the only person in Antananarivo to use the example of the "small homes" built for adolescent *côtiers* women to invite sexual partners as both evidence of loose *côtier* sexual behavior and as the basis with which to distinguish Merina and *côtier* sexuality. This example was provided by Merina, non-Merina and foreign expatriates alike. Among elite Merina, the small homes example was then followed by an insistence that this behavior would never be accepted among the Merina. And, as Dr. Solofo more

than implied, there is a value judgment placed on those who allow or encourage their young women to engage in sexual activity at their leisure.

The story told by data on sexual behavior

- 13 The descriptions of the distinctions between Merina and *côtier* women's sexuality are to a large extent supported by the literature and data on sexual behavior. The "small homes" description, for example, is supported by reported practice: a World Bank study commissioned to compile sexual beliefs and practices around the island found that among those interviewed who were identified as Bara ("*côtier* ethnic group" landlocked in the central south), about 29% of women had separate sleeping quarters during their adolescence. This was the case for 30% of the Sakalava (much of the west coast) and only 6% of the Merina (Zegers 2003). While most of the academics and others I spoke with in Antananarivo suggested that moving young women into a separate living space was explicitly and solely for the purposes of having sexual relations, a few also mentioned that, in certain regions, it was rooted in incest taboos, in order to assure a separation of the adolescent girl from her father and brothers. There is in fact plenty of evidence from different regions in Madagascar describing the ease with which sexual relations take place, particularly among younger, unmarried individuals.⁶
- 14 The elite Merina construction of Merina chastity is also supported by data, data which I chose to ignore for some time. There were a few Merina academics who insisted that Merina women were becoming just as sexually active as women from other groups, but because liberal female sexuality was negatively socially sanctioned, such activity would not be divulged; therefore, data on *reported* behavior would be highly questionable. I found this argument compelling. Furthermore, I often found both the tone and the content provided by elite Merina speakers when reflecting on comparisons between Merina and *côtier* sexuality to be condescending, at best. I concluded therefore that this constructed dichotomy served as an elite urban Merina basis for socially distancing *côtier* and rendering them inferior. Nonetheless, the extent of existing data which suggest that Merina are less sexually active than other groups in Madagascar is very hard to continue to ignore.
- 15 While ethnicity is not recorded in most standard health surveys in Madagascar, a relatively strong proxy for Merina "ethnicity" is the province of Antananarivo, as it represents the geographical centre of the Merina. Four out of six of the other provinces would be described as "*la côte*" (the other exception being the province of Fianarantsoa, region of the Betsileo).⁷
- 16 "Table below" combines data from three sources and shows that women in Antananarivo report later sexual debut, fewer sexual partners, and lower rates of engagement in transactional sex than women in any other province of the country (Instat & Orc Macro International 2005, Instat & Cnls 2007). These are of course reported sexual behaviors, and therefore potentially reflect Merina values rather than practices. However, the biological indicators reported on "table below" also support Merina assertions of female chastity (Instat & Orc Macro International 2005, Cnls & Ministère de la Santé et du Planning familial 2008). Both the national HIV surveillance survey and the Demographic and Health Survey find lower prevalence rates of HIV (among pregnant women) and syphilis (among women aged 15-49) in Antananarivo as compared to other provinces.

- 17 There are other important differences between Antananarivo and other provinces which may at least partially explain these differences in reported behaviors and biological markers. Access to health centers, urbanization and education all have been shown to influence sexual behavior and/or sexual health and these indicators differ by province in Madagascar (Instat & Orc Macro International 2005). Antananarivo is the most urbanized province; individuals have greater access to health centers in Antananarivo than elsewhere, and educational attainment levels are higher than any other province in the country. In the 2003-4 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), women 15-49 years of age in the province of Antananarivo reported having obtained on average 7.5 years of education; second to Antananarivo was the northern province of Antsiranana with a median of only 5.3 years of education (*ibid.*).

Sexual Behavioral Indicators by Province, Madagascar 2003-7

Province	Enquête de surveillance comportementale – Jeunes 2006; Unmarried women aged 15-24			Enquête surveillance biologique, 2007	Demographic and Health Survey, 2003-4
	Percent report being sexually active	Percent report 2+ sexual partners in the last 12 months	Percent report having had transactional sex in last 12 months	Percent of HIV positive pregnant women	Percent of women 15-49 positive for syphilis
Antananarivo	35.1	6.6	1.7	0	1.9
Fianarantsoa	53.9	12.7	12.2	0.55	3.2
Toamasina	64.1	20.4	17.8	0.37	12.8
Mahajanga	58.5	11.1	18.0	0.66	10.4
Toliara	81.1	38.4	29.7	0	8.8
Antsiranana	68.2	29.6	37.9	0	11.3

- 18 I explored the role that education plays in accounting for reported sexual behavior further. Using data from the 2003-4 DHS survey, I examined reported median age of first sexual intercourse for women 25-29 years of age by educational attainment in the province of Antananarivo as compared to Antsiranana. Women with less than 7 years of education reported a median age at first sex of 17.7 years in Antananarivo as compared to 15.7 in Antsiranana. If one restricts analysis to those with 7 or more years of education, however, the gap narrows: 18.8 years of age in Antananarivo as compared to 17.5 in Antsiranana. The gap narrows, but does not close.
- 19 Looking at the percentage of women who report having engaged in “transactional sex” (in this case received or provided money or goods following sexual intercourse) could lead one to conclude that the suggestions of the close associations between *côtier* identity and sex work are founded. However, what these data do not provide is an understanding of the meaning of “transactional sex” in different parts of the country.
- 20 Traditionally, in many parts of Madagascar, it was custom for a man to leave a woman with whom he has just had sex a token monetary symbol of respect. Feeley-Harnik (1991) writes about the sexual practices of the Sakalava with whom she worked in coastal

northwestern Madagascar. She portrays sexual relations as open and easy: a young man will propose to have sex with a young woman who, if interested, allows the man into her home/living quarters. Traditionally, the man will place a small amount of money under the pillow to show respect to her for giving the power of her body (as representation of fertility) to him.⁸ Feeley-Harnik explains that there was some suggestion that women had become less discerning of potential partners in the interest of the financial gains promised by the social obligation that a man should leave some money. Similarly, Mangalaza (1993) studying the Betsimisaraka (along the east coast) writes about how the money left by the man used to be a token gesture of respect and has grown to become more the primary focus in the sexual exchange. Cole, who studied youth and sexuality in the eastern town of Tamatave, has also found that the financial transaction in sex has become more and more interesting for women. She and Feeley-Harnik place these "transactional" sexual relationships on a continuum with "prostitution" at one end. Cole differentiates further between the woman who uses transactional sex to get herself ahead, mainly through marrying up (most desirably to a white man), and the woman who does not succeed and is resigned to prostitution and then poverty. The former is, she suggests, sometimes respected, while the latter is shamed (Cole 2004).

- 21 The expected financial remuneration for sex in every kind of relationship with women from certain regions of Madagascar may very well explain the elite Merina interpretation of the relationship between *côtier* identity and sex work; evidenced, for example, by that taxi driver who insisted that "about 70% of the women on the coasts are sex workers." Other community respondents made other suggestions such as: sex work was a way of life for *côtier* women; it was considered a profession, like any other; it was something "normal" for women from the coast to do. The studies that describe the transactional nature of traditional sexual relations in the north and east refute such notions, however, delineating between shameful prostitution and accepted – even respected – transactional sex. Fieldwork currently underway for a project on sexual behavior among youth in Antananarivo and Antsiranana corroborates this finding. Women in the northern port town of Antsiranana described the goal of marrying a European man solely for his wealth without any shame whatsoever, but they derogatorily depicted women who have multiple sexual partners explicitly in order to access goods and money as prostitutes. There are respectable and far less respectable ways in which to find a European husband; prostitution being the latter.
- 22 In summary, people I spoke with in Antananarivo presented two opposed imagined identities: the "chaste Merina woman" and the "loose *côtier* woman." The imagined sexually restrained Merina woman is used to construct a Merina moral high ground with women of "great value," in other words, women of greater value than *côtier* women. This understanding of *côtier* sexuality contributes to the construction of the nightclub as an inappropriate space for good Merina woman to occupy, given associations made between the *côtier* and the nightclub.

***Côtier* Sexuality in Antananarivo**

The nightclub as a *côtier* space

- 23 Nightclubs and bars were described by community members as centers of youthful debauchery. They were locales young *maditra* (naughty, bad, "fast" or "loose") men and

women would frequent for inappropriate pursuits and pleasures — to *mirevirevy* (“to pursue pleasure”, used to describe use of alcohol, tobacco or drugs, and sex). Nightclubs were locales that represented frivolity, misguided ambitions and interests, places where women who were overly materialistic and obsessed with fashion would spend their time. Mostly, however, nightclubs were synonymous with sex, and community members in Antananarivo generally agreed that they were frequented by sex workers, tourists, and young *maditra* women, and that the majority of Malagasy women there were *côtiers*.

- 24 In 2003-4, I studied how women engaged in informal sex work in one such location: *The Cabaret*, located in the heart of downtown Antananarivo. In *The Cabaret*, there is an air of festivity. In the evening, there is loud, live music playing, there are always drinks being served and food is available. There are some nights when there were virtually only Malagasy women in *The Cabaret*. The women danced, often provocatively, or even vulgarly, but not in a formal performance, rather as if they always elected to dance like that to good music. Because this is primarily a bar and music venue, it would not necessarily be clear to an outsider that most of the Malagasy women in *The Cabaret* were there with the intention of having foreign men pay them for sex. This was simply a club and functioned as such.
- 25 The atmosphere in discotheques was similar. There were about seven popular discotheques in Antananarivo in 2004. Some discotheques were known to be more “reserved” and “strict” than others. The most reserved nightclub restricted single Malagasy women from entering (particularly if they looked *mainty* or *côtier*), much to the offense of “modern” Malagasy women who were genuinely interested in going only to dance. Other nightclubs allowed countless numbers of single Malagasy women to enter.

The nightclub-going habitus

- 26 The women who would “go out” to places like *The Cabaret* played the role of women going to a bar or a discotheque in order to meet men, in a very Western version of boy meets girl. Most of these women were ideally looking for a young man of European descent to take an interest in them, ideally as a potential spouse. Women explained that they purposely did not outwardly flirt with a given man, but would rather subtly flirt and make the man believe that he had actively sought her out, so that he would be more willing to provide her with any financial support she would certainly mention to him she was in need of later. Yet, women were sometimes very forward with Vazaha men in discotheques and bars. When a woman was in particular need of money, she did not always wait for a man to approach, but instead actively pursued using tactics such as jumping on to unknown men’s laps, or dancing into men, pulsating buttocks first.
- 27 The vast majority of women who frequented nightclubs were assumed to be *côtier* by general community members, outreach team members who worked with sex workers, and by sex workers in Antananarivo who themselves did not frequent nightclubs. There are a number of reasons as to why these spaces were marked as *côtier* spaces: many of which can be described through the specific habitus required of those who frequent nightclubs and how one might perform that habitus. Borrowing from Bourdieu’s terminology (1998), there is a particular “bodily hexis”, body language, talk and posture associated with the habitus of the women who frequent nightclubs to *mitady vady Vazaha* (looking for a Vazaha husband) which is in turn associated with the *côtier* identity in Antananarivo. These identifiers include women’s hair, outward appearance, their manner

of speaking and their ability to dance. It should also be re-emphasized that these characteristics represent an ideal type, a set of stereotypical traits associated with the nightclub-going habitus.

- 28 Women were identified as *côtiers* in these locales based on their outward appearance, including their dress in *lamaody* (in this case, fashionable, trendy clothes) and the way they wore their hair. While *lamaody* means fashion, because club fashion was dictated largely by European and North American club-going trends, this meant very tight, revealing little outfits. Really revealing clothing is considered inappropriate for good Merina women. One wealthy Merina woman remarked: "*Those [sex workers] who go with Vazaha don't have a Malagasy way of thinking anymore: they wouldn't care even if all they were wearing [in the streets] was their underwear!*"
- 29 The notion here of a "Malagasy" way of thinking would probably more accurately be described as a Merina way of thinking. This woman is reflecting on the fact that women who go with Vazaha — and are therefore likely *côtiers* — dress highly inappropriately, in a way that pollutes Merina values.
- 30 Hair is an extremely important marker and identifier in Antananarivo (and Madagascar more generally). Elite Merina are expected to have smooth hair, hair that reflects their more Polynesian/Malaysian ancestry, while those identified as *côtier* have kinky hair, *ngita volo*, presumably a result of their more African ancestry.⁹ A woman with kinky hair who wears it in hundreds of braids is likely identified as *côtier*. To a large degree, the difference between what's considered bad (*mainty*) hair in Antananarivo (kinky hair) and *côtier* hair (braided hair) is one of economics. The hair extensions and the labor required to transform hair into hundreds of braids is expensive. If you cannot afford it, then you just have "bad" hair.
- 31 Women in nightclubs are also marked as *côtiers* because of their manner of speaking. *Côtiers* are expected to be more direct and aggressive speakers than Merina. The Merina are stereotypically indirect and reserved: they are vague and aloof. *Côtiers* are, conversely, stereotypically forward, direct, and aggressive; associations that were also made with sex workers more generally.
- 32 The third association between the nightclub and the *côtier* identity is the way women danced in these locales. Traditional Merina dancing is very reserved, with very little movement in the hips or the buttocks. Dances from some other ethnic groups are less reserved; there is more movement through the body. Women who danced in nightclubs were generally dancing in a rather provocative way, which was not necessarily modelled solely on traditional dance from other parts of the island, but also inspired by foreign music videos increasingly broadcasted on televisions and projected on a large screen at *The Cabaret*. Such dancing was constructed as a non-Merina ability.
- 33 Therefore the body-language, the spoken language, and how women dress and move in these locales, is associated with a certain habitus which was often associated with being identified as *côtier*. Yet, the communities' imagined understanding of the identity of those who frequent the nightclub was often at odds with the lives of the women I met in these locales, and followed throughout my fieldwork. For example, none of the three informant sex workers who frequented nightclubs had lived outside of Antananarivo for more than four years. Each had a Merina parent and each had a non-Merina parent. Of the 15 other women I spoke to informally on repeated occasions in these spaces, less than half had

parents who were both from outside of Antananarivo and had grown up outside of Antananarivo. The rest were either a mix or were Merina.

- 34 Nonetheless, these associations with the nightclub contribute to why Merina women are not expected to want to enter these spaces. Also significant is the spoken intention of those who do frequent these spaces, the interest in marrying a foreign man. Good Merina women would not be expected to want to enter such spaces frequented by Vazaha men, who are often there with the explicit intention of meeting a Malagasy woman. They would be shamed and shunned for explicitly going to a nightclub to find a white man. But the women who conduct sex work in these spaces make the most money and stand to gain the most from a long-term partnership with a (relatively) wealthy tourist. Unlike self-identified (*fotsy*) Merina women in Antananarivo, imagined *côtier* women do not stand to lose as much symbolic capital within the larger community by going into nightclubs and meeting Vazaha men, as they are expected to do so. Ultimately, pursuing Vazaha men does not further denigrate *côtier* women, while it would Merina women.¹⁰

Social consequences of acting *côtier* in Antananarivo

- 35 One of my informants who practiced informal sex work in bars and nightclubs, Denise, illustrates the consequences of "going out" to these locales on her and her family's social capital. Throughout my fieldwork, I learned that Denise's nuclear family was facing social exclusion from her extended family. Although Denise initially suggested that this was due to her mother's extensive and severe mental illness, it eventually became clear that Denise's activities at the very least contributed to this exclusion. The exclusion was hurtful (Denise and her family were not invited to her cousin's wedding), but not as important as the efforts her extended family members were making to claim their rights over some of Denise's family's assets. Denise's mother, when she was still healthy, was a legitimate home and property owner. Denise's mother's sister was trying take over the ownership of house and property. Property and home ownership are forms of real wealth that Denise and her brothers and sisters now still have claim to. Using Denise's bad behavior as a justification for relieving them of these holdings was a very dangerous, significant threat, and one potential consequence of "going out" at night.
- 36 As Cole (2004) similarly describes in her examination of young women in Tamatave, if the goal of marrying a Vazaha is not attained, it can mean a steep and steady decline in economic capital that can end in poverty. Another informant illustrated how far one can fall. While in her youth, she had spent her time in nightclubs entertaining Vazaha; ten years later, at the time of fieldwork, she was squatting in a one room house of loosely bound wooden planks with her three children.

Subjective understanding of being *côtier*

- 37 Above, I described how women who frequent nightclubs and bars are often identified as *côtier* by the community in Antananarivo. The women themselves, however, did not necessarily understand it that way. Informant Simone is an interesting example of this. She danced provocatively in bars: she could, for example, balance a bottle of beer on her head while moving her ass and her hips in extremely fast circular and vibrating motions. She was interested in having and wearing *lamaody* (fashionable, trendy clothing) whether during the day or at night. Simone practiced many characteristics associated with *côtiers*

which would likely contribute to her being identified as *côtier* by outsiders. However, Simone differentiated herself from *côtiers* women at *The Cabaret*. She explained to me that it's the *côtiers* women who do not use condoms, and will accept being paid next to nothing, and contrasted herself to these characterizations. Therefore, despite the apparent adoption of a *côtier* habitus in bars and nightclubs, Simone chooses to differentiate herself from this identity, indicating that she understands full well that it is not an identity that is well viewed in Antananarivo.

38 What is somewhat ironic is that Simone has chosen to fully embrace the greatest marker of the *côtier* identity: the interest in marrying a Vazaha. Simone first makes it clear that being known to *mitady vola* (look for money) is not well thought of in Antananarivo. She explains: "[Community members] are prejudiced. These are prostitutes. Why don't they get married and work in 'zone franche'.¹¹ They are always criticizing them. Women who *mitady vola* are never right. They are always blamed."

39 However, Simone then goes on to say something very interesting. She explains that once she came to see herself as someone who goes to look for a husband, rather than money, then she no longer felt the shame she recognizes above:

Janie: Before you started to *mitady vola*, what opinion did you have of yourself?

Simone: It seemed to me that it was something shameful. But it was better than working in zone franche which was really exhausting though the salary was low, the food not enough, and it didn't allow you to have decent clothes.

Janie: Why were you ashamed?

Simone: I thought it was not an appropriate thing to do, but as I needed money...

Kirsten: When you began, you hid it from your family?

Simone: Yeah, they did not know at all, because it was shameful. When I got a Vazaha, and he wanted to come home with me, then they knew, "Oh, she's going out," like that... ... So later, it wasn't shameful at all anymore, because, after that, they all knew I was with a Vazaha, and so I was no longer embarrassed about it.

Janie: So what do you think of yourself now?

Simone: It's okay now because the goal is to find a Vazaha husband each time I go out, so it doesn't matter at all.

40 As described above, one of many characteristics which distinguish the *côtier* woman identity is the value placed on marrying a Vazaha. While among high class (self-defined *fotsy*) Merina, it is not considered desirable if a woman marries a Vazaha, it is well looked upon in some other parts of Madagascar. Therefore, Simone has incorporated this identity and uses it to push away negative remarks from her family and the community. She has decided that because she is looking for a *vady Vazaha*, it is acceptable that she spends time in these locales. However, while she may have used this as a means of self-justification of behavior, it appears it was not an adequate explanation for her family. Although Simone described the individuals I met on several occasions when I visited Simone's home as her family, I later learned that these family members were not in fact related to her in any way. In the conversation recounted above, Simone goes on to reveal that her family members still blame her, but that she doesn't care because she "wants to marry a Vazaha."

Discussion

41 I have described here the elite Merina social construction of *côtier* sexual identity as contrasted to elite Merina's representations of their own sexual identity. I am therefore

conveying a perspective represented by a small, yet powerful segment of society. I would maintain that this representation of *côtier* sexuality serves to uphold broader social hierarchical structures in Antananarivo. While some of the assertions about actual reported behaviour are indeed supported by data, the underlying assumptions about what is right or wrong, acceptable or not, are choices, subject to manipulation, and manipulated by the dominant class. The significance of these moral judgements is evident in the choices that women working in the sexual economy in Antananarivo made about how they engaged in that economy. At least in part, certain women's decisions to avoid the nightclub were based on the social risks the nightclub represented, despite facing greater physical risks on the streets.

- 42 As detailed more thoroughly elsewhere (see Stoebenau 2009), informants who practiced informal sex work in nightclubs in 2003 typically gained at least double the money within a month that informants working the streets would earn. In addition, informants who worked in nightclubs did not report episodes of violence, outside of a few women who reported intimate partner violence (which is not to suggest that this type of violence is ultimately any less dangerous). Informants and colleagues who worked on the streets, however, universally reported having been victims of rape and other violent crime at least once, and typically multiple times, throughout the duration of their work on the street.
- 43 The combination of the habitus required for the nightclub and the (more than likely related) associations made between the nightclub and the *côtier* identity at least in part explain some women's choice to streetwalk for lower profits and higher risk of violence rather than frequent nightclubs. Because the habitus of sex work in nightclubs and bars involved a "love performance", it meant that women had to be prepared to carry on with this performance outside of the nightclub if a man they met wished to dine with them, or more crucially, see their home and meet their family. No Merina woman of relatively little means could bring a man of European descent home without significantly raising suspicion among her family and her community as to where and how they met. The result would inevitably be discrimination against her family within her extended family and community. While women risk being spotted on a street corner, they do not have to carry their street-corner identity home with them; rather, they often do what they can to hide this identity from family and community, and hold onto the hope that they can earn a living and maintain respect within their family and their community.
- 44 It is important to address the timing of this research effort. First, the fieldwork took place immediately following the political crisis of 2002 which served to heighten ethnic tension in Madagascar. This leadership crisis between a *côtier* incumbent president (Didier Ratsiraka) and Merina president-elect Marc Ravalomanana was cast in ethnic terms. Ratsiraka used language to spark these tensions toward his favor (Randrianja 2003). When Ravalomanana came to power, he did not dissolve these tensions and additionally rejuvenated other related "caste" distinctions in Antananarivo. Both the crisis and its aftermath undoubtedly affect the findings reported here and the reality that was captured in my fieldwork in 2003-4.
- 45 In addition, these data and findings are based on fieldwork conducted now over five years ago. There are certainly changes that have taken place since 2004 which are likely very significant. The first is communication channels, namely the Internet. The Internet allows "good" Merina women to meet Vazaha men without having to denigrate themselves by entering a nightclub. Cyber-cafes are now extremely common in Antananarivo, and while

there remains extreme global inequality in technological know-how and utilization, more and more women and men can access this tool for creating and expanding social networks. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many young Merina women are making use of Internet chat sites for the purposes of establishing contact with Vazaha men¹².

- 46 Finally, foreign media exposure, also on the rise in Madagascar, is spurring Malagasy versions of Western productions, such as the Malagasy equivalent to *American Idol*, *Pazzapa*, where young Malagasy want-to-be famous singers compete to become crowned best new Malagasy musical talent. Each episode includes elaborate song and dance routines, and the dancing involved is modern, based mostly on hip hop stylings. These dancers seem to be greeted with respect, and the dance styles and performances considered legitimate, rather than inappropriate. Therefore, notions of sexy dancing styles and the *côtier* identity may be fading. These changes serve as a reminder that the bases and the purpose for the Merina social construction of the *côtier* identity depicted here represent a snapshot in a highly dynamic setting; while this social construction likely remains significant today, it is subject to constant renegotiation.

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NOTES

1. While the term “*vazaha*” means foreigner, it most often refers to white, European foreigner, among whom, in Madagascar, the vast majority are French — both in terms of the resident expatriate community and the tourist population.
2. I deliberately forgo describing a second imagined dichotomy in urban Antananarivo, that between the *mainity* and the *fotsy*, the former the modern term for those of slave descent and the latter the modern term for those self-defined as of non-slave descent, often self-proclaimed of noble descent, or *andriana*, related to descent-group affiliations which existed prior to colonization in Imerina. The dominant culture in Antananarivo is a culture of the *fotsy*. For more on slavery in Madagascar and descent groups in Antananarivo, see Stoebeu 2006, Larson 2000, Rajaoson 1997, Ramamonjisoa 1984.
The *côtier* and *mainity* identities are often conflated and equally imagined in Antananarivo. I concentrate here on how *côtiers* are implicitly distinguished from Merina, as based on moral capital tied to sexuality; as opposed to the *mainity/fotsy* dichotomy which is reflected primarily by socio-economic status or worth.
3. I would like to thank Pier Larson (pers. comm. 2005) for helping me to see this connection.
4. In addition, many scholars insist that the importance of Christianity in any notion of Merina identity is almost entirely isolated to urban Antananarivo (Rakotomalala 2005 pers. comm., Graeber 1996).
5. For a treatise on Merina values and Christianity, see Raison-Jourde 1991.
6. For northwest, see Feeley-Harnik (1991) ; for the south, among the Bara, Huntington (1988) ; for the east coast, Mangalaza (1993) ; Cole (2004) on Betsimisaraka ; Bloch (1999) on Zafimaniry.
In addition, there is a practice in some parts of Madagascar (particularly among groups in the south and the Sakalava of the west) that male dignitaries are presented with a sexual partner for the duration of their stay (Goedefroit 1998). This was once also common in Imerina, at least among visitors to the rulers (Larson 2000).
7. The province was the largest administrative unit at the time the surveys described below were conducted.
8. Among the Tandroy, it is the women who do *not* receive money who are poorly viewed, as this would indicate a lack of self-respect (Fee 2003:chap. 4).
9. This is also the case for those identified as descendants of the lowest caste, *andevo*, currently described as *mainity* or “blacks” among the Merina in Antananarivo. These distinctions portrayed about women’s hair, as well as the other characteristics described, are of course highly essentialized, as there are certainly people originating from outside of Imerina with “smooth” hair.
10. That said, recent evidence comparing urban Antananarivo to urban Antsiranana suggests that, unlike urban Merina assumptions, the nightclub may very well not be considered a “respectable” space for women in other parts of Madagascar as well. In our recent population-based study of youth behaviour (among 2225 15-24 years old), while only 5.6 % of women in urban Antananarivo reported going to a nightclub in the last six months; this percentage only increased to 8 % for women in urban Antsiranana.
11. *Zone franche*, or free-trade zones, refer here to textile industry factories, a rapidly expanding sector of the economy in Madagascar during the 1990s. They employ primarily women and nearly all of these jobs are located in or near Antananarivo.
12. See also Cole (2010) on this phenomenon in the east coast city of Tamatave.

ABSTRACTS

The paper describes the elite urban Merina social construction of *côtiers* women's sexual identity in Antananarivo. It juxtaposes social hierarchy within women's sex work to the broader system of social stratification in the city of Antananarivo. Specifically, drawing from ethnically-based imagined distinctions between street and nightclub-based sex work, this paper discusses the important dimension that sexualized ethnic identity plays in the social stratification system of Antananarivo more generally.

L'article décrit la définition de l'identité sexuelle des femmes côtières selon la construction sociale de l'élite urbaine merina vivant à Antananarivo. Il juxtapose la hiérarchie sociale des travailleuses du sexe à l'ensemble du système de stratification sociale dans la ville. En s'appuyant plus précisément sur des différences ethniques imaginaires entre travailleuses du sexe des rues et celles des discothèques, ce document traite plus généralement de la dimension importante que joue l'identité ethnique sexualisée dans le système de stratification sociale d'Antananarivo.

INDEX

Subjects: anthropology

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